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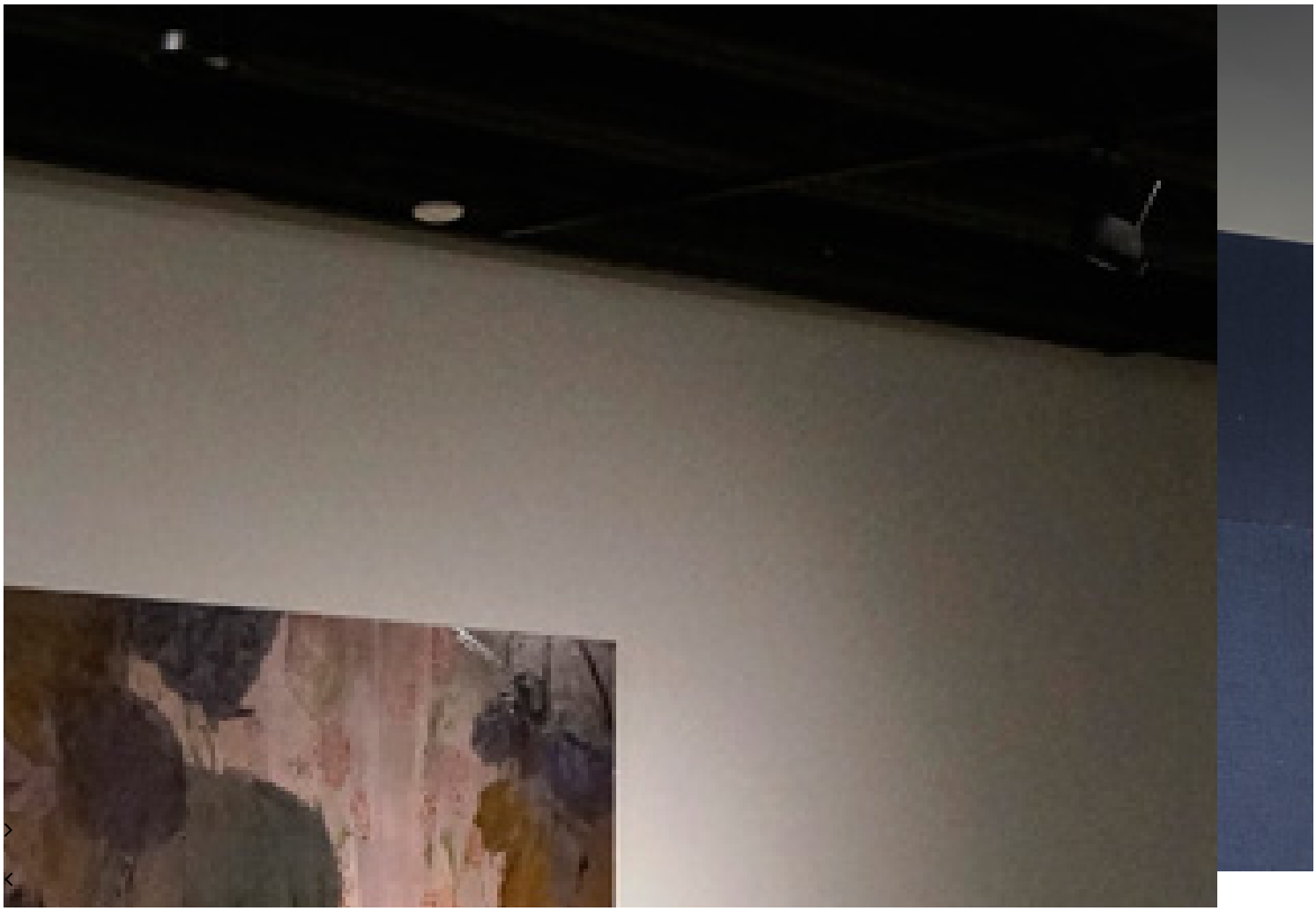

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"2015 Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Artist Awards," H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute (http://kcstudio.org/2015-charlotte-street-foundation-visual-artist-awards-block-artspace/)

by James Martin (http://kcstudio.org/author/jmartin/) November 4, 2015
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Since 1997, the Charlotte Street Foundation has provided vital support for artists in the greater Kansas City area. The foundation's stated mission is "to challenge, nurture, and empower artists of exceptional vision." One of the most well-known ways the organization does this is through the $10,000 cash prizes it awards to Kansas City-area artists every year.

The 2015 Visual Artist Award winners are Jill Downen, who works with installations, drawings and models; Rashawn Griffin, who produces paintings, sculpture and installations; and painter Misha Kligman.

The Artspace floor plan contributes to an especially effective exhibition, as each room contains the work of just one artist. In the first room, Jill Downen contributed *Threshold*, a striking installation that brings to mind a modern-day chapel created as an aid to meditating on the surrounding space, as well as the history of art.

Downen states on her website that her art "is a focused investigation of the symbiotic relationship between the human body and architecture." Indeed, in her work here, visitors move back and forth through the room, viewing each portion of her three-part installation from different angles while assessing the relationships between components. A lengthy gold-leafed scrim hangs from the ceiling in the center of the room. To the west, a tall, meandering vertical form rises from the wall, constructed from plaster, drywall joint compound and polystyrene. A bold blue rectangle composed of gridded squares commands the south wall, accompanied by a narrow slit of sunlight shining into the room along the floor, a remnant of the window covered up by the artist.

Each blue square has been heavily worked to create a variety of textures and thicknesses, giving a sense of age. The pigment is comprised of lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone that is powdered to make intensely blue hues. Lapis lazuli has a long history in art, and became especially well-known in Italy beginning around 1400 as the growth of art patronage offset the expense of using it. Downen's shining gold leaf and sturdy plaster also recalls Italian art history, particularly altarpieces and fresco paintings.

In the middle room, Misha Kligman's four adroit paintings create a different type of contemplative space. Remarking on a previous body of work, Kligman has stated that "maybe a painting can be more than an object, but a kind of place where the past and future collide, in the process revealing that which is most hidden—our present."

His work at Block Artspace seems to continue this approach of reflecting on painting aesthetics, personal attachments and memory. Kligman mixes and matches elements such as depictions of family members, floating foregrounds and disconnected body parts among flattened backgrounds, with the result that his imagery seems almost dream-like.

The Unsaid features the painter's wife, Amy, set within floral forms, branches and leaves, backed by a floral curtain. For the most part, the artist's handling of pictorial space is fairly traditional in this work, with a foreground, middle ground and background. The picture space in *Goodnight Nobody* resembles *The Unsaid* in that the central image—in this case, a detached pair of arms—is surrounded by plant forms.

The other two paintings in the room break from this depiction of space. In *Grasp*, an image of the Kligmans' son in a reclining pose seems to float in the foreground. A tangle of trees behind him appears to spread across the canvas rather than project into its background. *Not Yet* presents disembodied feet and lower legs standing on a hardwood floor that, like the boy in *Grasp*, hovers in front of a minimally described backdrop.

Compared to the contemplative works by Downen and Kligman, Rashawn Griffin's offering in the back room initially seems more like a funhouse, complete with multicolored changing lights overhead. Tall mirrors line the exterior of *Dimple*, a large cubicle that the artist built near the center of the room. During the show's crowded opening reception, viewers strutted and mugged around *Dimple*, comparing the effects of one mirror to the others. Inside a dark room lit by (http://kcstudio.org/) colored lights and changing videos, glows from beneath a seat and reflects off of a dark vinyl wall.

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Two other works nearby strike a more somber tone. Next to the gallery entrance, the work *Untitled (can't do this)* features a tall stalk of ornamental grass mounted beneath a framed sheet of paper with handwritten words arranged in three lines: "I [which is marked out heavily] can't do this, who knows what will happen? People depend on me." To the south, a wall-length fiber piece called *Untitled (and I would eat my children)* resembles a monumentally sized striped color field painting in a predominantly dark palette. The title recalls the Greek myth of Cronus, the Titan leader who swallowed his own children as they were born when he learned that one of them would depose him.

An untitled installation in a side room returns to the more playful mood. Four framed mixed-media works on paper hang on a fluorescent orange wall, accompanied by more stalks of tall grass in the corner. In one of the framed pieces, cutout illustrations of cowboy hats, faces, horse heads and various other animal heads join together through multiple panes of glass to form cartoon-like images.

Despite the lighthearted appearance of Griffin's work, there may be more at play. Given the prevalence of mirrors here, as well as the self-doubt present in *Untitled (can't do this)* and the power-at-all-costs expression of *Untitled (and I would eat my children),* it's tempting to read this body of work biographically and wonder if Griffin feels ambivalent about art world success. If so, then a braided steel cable that the artist stretched between two walls takes on rich metaphorical possibilities: a thread holding the installation together, or perhaps a tightrope to be walked, or a lifeline to be grasped.

"Charlotte Street Foundation Visual Artist Awards" continues at H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, 16 East 43rd St., through Dec. 16. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, 816-561-5563 or www.kcai.edu/artspace (http://www.kcai.edu/artspace).

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